What Do Empires Do?

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When I wrote my book ***Against Empire*** in 1995, as might be expected, some of my U.S. compatriots thought it was wrong of me to call the United States an *empire*. It was widely believed that U.S. rulers did not pursue empire; they intervened abroad only out of self-defense or for humanitarian rescue operations or to overthrow tyranny, fight terrorism, and propagate democracy.

But by the year 2000, everyone started talking about the United States as an empire and writing books with titles like ***Sorrows of Empire***, ***Follies of Empire***, ***Twilight of Empire***, or ***Empire of Illusions***--- all referring to the *United States* when they spoke of empire.

Even conservatives started using the word. Amazing. One could hear right-wing pundits announcing on U.S. television, "We're an empire, with all the responsibilities and opportunities of empire and we better get used to it"; and "We are the strongest nation in the world and have every right to act as such"---as if having the power gives U.S. leaders an inherent entitlement to exercise it upon others as they might wish.

"What is going on here?" I asked myself at the time. How is it that so many people feel free to talk about empire when they mean a *United States empire?* The ideological orthodoxy had always been that, unlike other countries, the USA did not indulge in colonization and conquest.

The answer, I realized, is that the word has been divested of its full meaning. "Empire" seems nowadays to mean simply *dominion* and *control*. Empire---for most of these late-coming critics--- is concerned almost exclusively with

power and prestige. What is usually missing from the public discourse is the *process* of empire and its *politico-economic content*. In other words, while we hear a lot about empire, we hear very little about *imperialism*.

Now that is strange, for imperialism is what empires are all about. Imperialism is what empires do. And by imperialism I do not mean the process of extending power and dominion without regard to material and financial interests. Indeed "imperialism" has been used by some authors in the same empty way that they use the word "empire," to simply denote dominion and control with little attention given to political economic realities.

But I define *imperialism* as follows: the process whereby the dominant investor interests in one country bring to bear their economic and military power upon another nation or region in order to expropriate its land, labor, natural resources, capital, and markets-in such a manner as to enrich the investor interests. In a word, empires do not just pursue "power for power's sake." There are real and enormous material interests at stake, fortunes to be made many times over.

So for centuries the ruling interests of Western Europe and later on North America and Japan went forth with their financiers---and when necessary their armies---to lay claim to most of planet Earth, including the labor of indigenous peoples, their markets, their incomes (through colonial taxation or debt control or other means), and the abundant treasures of their lands: their gold, silver, diamonds, copper, rum, molasses, hemp, flax, ebony, timber, sugar, tobacco, ivory, iron, tin, nickel, coal, cotton, corn, and more recently: uranium, manganese, titanium, bauxite, oil, and--say it again--oil. (Hardly a complete listing.)

Empires are enormously profitable for the dominant economic interests of the imperial nation but enormously costly to the people of the colonized country. In addition to suffering the pillage of their lands and natural resources, the people of these targeted countries are frequently killed in large numbers by the intruders.

This is another thing that empires do which too often goes unmentioned in the historical and political

literature of countries like the United States, Britain, and France. Empires impoverish whole populations and kill lots and lots of innocent people. As I write this, President Obama and the national security state for which he works are waging two and a half wars (Iraq, Afghanistan, and northern Pakistan), and leveling military threats against Yemen, Iran, and, on a slow day, North Korea. Instead of sending medical and rescue aid to Haiti, Our Bomber sent in the Marines, the same Marines who engaged in years of mass murder in Haiti decades ago and supported more recent massacres by proxy forces.

The purpose of all this killing is to prevent alternative, independent, self-defining nations from emerging. So the empire uses its state power to gather private wealth for its investor class. And it uses its public wealth to shore up its state power and prevent other nations from self-developing.

Sooner or later this arrangement begins to wilt under the weight of its own contradictions. As the empire grows more menacing and more murderous toward others, it grows sick and impoverished within itself.

From ancient times to today, empires have always been involved in the bloody accumulation of wealth. If you don't think this is true of the United States then stop calling it "Empire." And when you write a book about how it wraps its arms around the planet, entitle it "Global Bully" or "Bossy Busybody," but be aware that you're not telling us much about imperialism.

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